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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000575

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP TO GOMEL STRESSFUL, REWARDING

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

#### Summary

¶1. (SBU) Ambassador on June 20-21 made an introductory visit to Gomel and Rechitsa to deliver a shipment of western medicines to an oncology center and meet with authorities and civil society activists. Hospitable authorities praised local economic growth and sought greater U.S. investment. Political and civil society activists criticized rights abuses and resented decisions from their political parties' national leadership, but stressed unity within the coalition. Although happy to have Ambassador as a visitor, authorities made several attempts to hijack her schedule and sit in on private meetings. End summary.

#### Gomel Economy Growing, U.S. Trade "Unsatisfactory"

¶2. (C) Ambassador met with the Chairman of the Gomel Oblast Council of Deputies Valeriy Felitskiy and other local officials. Felitskiy lauded Gomel's economic "growth" and industry production (tractors, textiles, furniture), and attributed Gomel's success to a highly educated workforce and cheap and ecologically clean resources. (Note: The Gomel oblast, in southeastern Belarus just north of Chernobyl, is the most heavily radiologically contaminated region in Belarus. End note.) Felitskiy called current Belarusian-U.S. trade "unsatisfactory" (USD 30 million in Gomel exports to the U.S. in 2006) and frowned on the overall downturn in international trade, which he attributed to the energy conflict with Russia. Felitskiy thanked Ambassador for the medical shipment and the USG's continuous support of projects aimed to alleviate the consequences of the Chernobyl tragedy.

#### Ambassador Delivers Medicine to Patients

¶3. (C) Following a small press conference with Felitskiy and a quick tour of the Patskevich Palace and WWII museum, Ambassador delivered to the Gomel Oncology Dispensary part of the U.S. NGO CitiHope International's USD 1.8 million shipment of antibiotics to Belarus on April 26. Ambassador toured the Dispensary and met with several patients and doctors. The ceremony generated several positive stories on independent websites.

#### American Corners

¶4. (C) With Gomel's Head Ideology officer Yevginiy Mitkevich at her side and state journalists in tow, Ambassador visited the American Corners at the Regional Library to deliver new

English language books and study materials and to talk with English teachers. Ambassador stated that political relations between the United States and Belarus were strained, but stressed the importance of student and professional exchanges in developing a better relationship between the two countries.

#### Authorities Sit In On Ambassador's Meeting With NGOs

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15. (C) Before her dinner with heads of NGOs dealing with the consequences of Chernobyl, Mitkevich requested to Ambassador that he sit in on the meeting. Ambassador agreed, but noted that his attendance would not be required at the next day's meetings with civil society and political activists. Mitkevich sat next to Ambassador during her dinner, often interrupting participants to refute accusations that the government purposely closed independent newspapers and was not meeting the basic health needs of villagers still living in contaminated zones.

16. (C) Mitkevich called the conversation a good example of a trilateral dialogue and suggested that the rest of Ambassador's meetings include local government representatives (i.e., Mitkevich). The NGO leaders told Ambassador that they had repeatedly tried to start a dialogue with the authorities and later noted to Poloff that Ambassador's presence was the only reason Mitkevich was speaking to them. Throughout the rest of the Gomel trip, Mitkevich repeatedly asked Ambassador in front of state cameramen and journalists whether he could sit in on the rest of the Ambassador's meetings with independent journalists and political party activists.

#### The Plight for Journalists and Activists

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17. (C) On June 21, Ambassador had breakfast with 12 independent reporters who accused the GOB of stifling media freedom by closing independent newspapers without due process and denying them access to state distribution networks. Most independent journalists left the country and those who stayed had trouble obtaining accreditation. Opposition activists from the United Civic Party (UCP), Belarusian National Front (BNF), Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC), Radio and Electronic Workers Union (REP), Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) and Aleksandr Milinkevich's "For Freedom" movement (FF) in a separate meeting briefed Ambassador on the typical harassment from authorities, the local government's attempts to portray a recently discovered NKVD mass grave as the site of a Nazi massacre, and the beating of a REP union member.

18. (C) UCP activist Vladimir Katsora called the May 26-27 Congress of Democratic Forces a necessary evil that put all political parties' positions in the open, but did not solve the fissures that had developed in the coalition. However, local coalitions remained united and were ready to work. Katsora explained that rural party chapters were heavily dependent on the decisions made at the national party level that sometimes impaired coalition activity on the local level.

#### Rechitsa - The Center of Europe

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19. (C) Ambassador then left for Rechitsa, leaving Mitkevich and his Belarusian KGB cameraman at the city limits. Rechitsa deputy mayor Andrey Korniyenko greeted Ambassador at the border of the Rechitsa district, giving her flowers on the side of the highway and leading the Embassy vehicle into the city. Similar to Ambassador's meeting with the Gomel authorities, Korniyenko praised Rechitsa's economic growth, industries (nail and screw production, oil extraction company Belarusneft), and culture. Of course, Rechitsa was looking for foreign investment. He boasted that Rechitsa was the

center of Europe, because it was geographically equidistant from Portugal and the Ural mountains. (Comment: A claim we hear often from every local administration about their towns. End comment.)

#### Deputy Mayor Not Happy With Opposition Visit

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¶10. (C) After a quick movie about Rechitsa, Korniyenko gave Ambassador a walking tour of the town center, particularly the reconstruction efforts of historic buildings, and arranged tours of the music school and museum that were just completed in preparation of the upcoming Dazhynki harvest festival. Korniyenko used his time with Ambassador to lambaste the local opposition, calling them has-beens who "just wanted power" and "European money."

¶11. (C) Korniyenko constantly tried to hijack Ambassador's schedule -- taking her to the local headquarters of Belarusneft and the children's lyceum despite Poloff's complaints -- and made it clear he did not approve of her meeting with the political opposition. Similar to Mitkevich in Gomel, Korniyenko repeatedly asked in front of cameras to attend the meeting, but Ambassador denied the request, replying that it was part of her duties as a diplomat to listen to other opinions.

#### Harassment - Nothing New

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¶12. (C) Opposition activists from the BNF, UCP, FF, and BSDP told Ambassador that authorities harass opponents, pressure employers to fire them and family members, and make legal decisions without due process. The activists complained about the Dazhynki construction work, which razed historic buildings and built a concert stage on the banks of the Dnepr River without consideration of potential ecological damage. The activists named Korniyenko as the primary perpetrator of civil right violations, claiming he personally stuffed ballot boxes in the local council elections and tried to plant weapons in the apartments of activists ahead of police searches. Independent media is stifled and the lack of available jobs frightens employed dissidents from reporting abuses.

¶13. (C) The Rechitsa political leaders also criticized their parties' national leadership for not properly allocating resources. They noted that national offices had printers, faxes, and computers, but the local level parties could not even afford to pay rent. According to the activists, the youth are the future for the opposition, but in places like

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Rechitsa, they need a strong leader and to date do not have one.

#### Comment

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¶14. (C) Although authorities were cordial to Ambassador, the tenacity of state "journalists" filming every movement and the ideology officers' insistence that they sit in on private meetings further illustrates the significant stress Emboffs face on regional trips. Largely due to Ambassador's status, the state media and authorities restrained themselves from barging into meetings uninvited. However, local authorities and BKGB did not show such restraint during Ambassador's June 15 trip to Dzherzhinsk, when they proceeded to film Ambassador's lunch with local opposition activists and attempted to enter one activist's house where Ambassador was having tea.

¶15. (C) Gomel and Rechitsa authorities' speeches sounded practically identical and lacked anything unusual. Despite the ideology officers' harassment, everyone who Ambassador met, including the authorities and especially the doctors at

the Dispensary, were excited to have her as a guest and did not hesitate to praise the United States in one way or another, further proving that the benefits of regional trips and public outreach far outweigh the costs.

Stewart